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Individuals' interactions in non-profit sharing economies: A social exchange theory approach

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ABSTRACT

The rise of online platforms and the sharing economy in the last decade has opened up new opportunities for both locals' and tourists' needs to be better addressed within the context of tourism. Yet little is known about the diverse range of resources being exchanged in tourism-related activities or the overall pre- and post-trip experiences. To address this gap, the current research aims to identify the expectations, actual resources exchanged and final experiences of hosts, guests and non-profit organisations (NPOs) that function as a sharing economy platform. Social exchange theory is utilised to investigate the expectations and actual resources exchanged that drive or impede positive experiences between these three key actors. The data collection will use a netnography approach and follow-up interviews. The practical contribution of this research will assist NPOs to better design socially responsible marketing communication and activities, to avoid discrepancies between expectations and actual resources exchanged.

Key words: tourism non-profit organisations, host–guest exchange, sharing economy, collective entities and individual interactions, experiences, social exchange theory

INTRODUCTION

The sharing economy approach has attracted criticism from both practitioners and academics regarding unfair advantages against traditional businesses (Malhotra & Van Alstyne, 2014; Ranchordás, 2015; Sigala, 2014). In fact the term coined as 'sharing economy' is regarded with suspicion among analysts around the globe, who pointed out the discrepancies between the term and real practices (Belk, 2014; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Puschmann & Alt, 2016; Ranchordás, 2015; Sigala, 2014). This concept, however, seems to better fit non-profit

organisations (NPOs) as they are created to provide a service to society (John, 2013; Schor, 2014). In fact, NPOs are participating in the sharing economy system successfully as it seems to be a practical way to overcome the difficult task of finding resources to keep their service or product feasible (Belk, 2014; Raymond, 2001; Reagle, 2010). Typical examples of these sharing platforms include CouchSurfing, the Sharehood, Wikipedia or the Linux operating system.

To this point, little attention has been paid to the exchange of resources that occurred in tourism sharing economies, especially within the context of the third sector. In particular, critical explorations into three key actors – the hosts', the guests' and the intermediaries' perceptions of the real value of participating in sharing economies – have been lacking (Schor, 2014; Sigala, 2014). The current body of academic research on sharing economies has focused on, for instance, the new trends that e-commerce and the adoption of Web 2.0 has brought into the current economic system (Guttentag, 2015); the need to provide a legal framework that regulates e-commerce, which enables consumer-to-consumer transactions (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Munro, 2016; Ranchordás, 2015); reasons for participating as either a host or a guest (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Kim, Yoon, & Zo, 2015; Möhlmann, 2015; Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016); and most recently, the sub-economies that orbit around sharing economies (Sigala, 2018). Arguably, the problem of neglecting research on expected versus actual exchanged resources may lead to the loss of opportunities to build trust in sharing economies. Hence, the particular aim of the current research is to observe the interactions among these three parties and identify how they affect their pre-trip expectations, actual resources exchanged during the trip and final post-trip experiences in the framework of the sharing economies. To achieve this aim, the current research investigates hosts', guests' and NPOs' expectations and actual resource exchanges that drive or impede positive experiences under the framework of tourism social exchange theory (see Ap, 1992).

Social exchange theory focuses on the process of exchanging material, social and/or psychological resources during the two-way flow of these resources between individuals and groups of individuals (Ap, 1992). Ap's model outlines four stages: a) initiation of an exchange, b) exchange formation, c) exchange transaction evaluation and d) evaluation of exchange consequences. In tourism research, studies have mainly focused on the evaluation of exchange consequences at a macro level and the interactions between collective entities (Chhabra, 2008; Lee & Back, 2003). Therefore, there is a need to gain knowledge in understanding social exchanges at a micro level, looking at the interactions that occur

between the subgroups and the individuals who comprise the collective entities (Moyle, Croy, & Weiler, 2010).

RESEARCH APPROACH

The collective entities for this study are international NPOs that serve as a travel platform from which travellers can book trips and/or tours with locals in developing countries. The individuals are hosts who promote their homestay and/or tour via a particular NPO and guests who book a trip or tour with this particular host via the NPO's online platform. To study the interactions among NPOs, hosts and guests, the current research will use netnography to collect and analyse data in a preliminary stage. This approach utilises ethnographic methods to collect data in an online form that provides some advantages, such as cost efficiency, selection of a broader cohort of respondents and observation of participants' textual comments (Kozinets, 2002, 2015). Purposive sampling will be used to recruit NPOs to gather an appropriate representative sample, while guests and hosts will be invited to participate in the current research via their NPO's website. To avoid conflict of interests among the three parties, the research team will design three separate internet community sites for data collection purposes: one for NPO representatives, one for guests and one for hosts. These three sites will allow the community to be made private and for hosts and guests to be matched with their corresponding NPOs. An informed consent of observation and participation will be disclosed to participants ensuring the anonymity of members and their rights as participants (Roy, Gretzel, Yanamandram, & Waitt, 2015). Participants' identity will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect their privacy (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). The internet community sites will contain targeted questions about the three parties' pre-trip expectations, actual resources exchanged and post-trip experiences. After this participation, an invitation for a follow-up interview will be given. This interview's instrument will use questions related to clarifying and expanding information on the four stages of Ap's (1992) model (Moyle et al., 2010). Finally, a thematic approach will be used for data analysis and an independent coder with no previous involvement in the study will assist to verify the intercode reliability.

CONCLUSION

The current research seeks to yield theoretical, methodological and practical contributions. The theoretical contribution of this research will expand knowledge into interactions among

collective entities and individuals, providing with this a contribution to social exchange theory. The methodological contribution will inform challenges and opportunities when netnography and semistructured interviews will be used to complement each other. Finally, the practical contribution of the current research will help to improve NPOs' interactions with their hosts and guests to satisfy both hosts' and guests' expectations within a still polemic sharing economy system.

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